Irregularities found in PA, MPA hostels' accounts

By Intikhab Hanif

LAHORE, Dec 31: An audit and inspection report prepared by the Director-General, Audit, Punjab, has pointed out serious irregularities in the accounts of the Punjab Assembly and its attached MPAs hostels.

The audit was conducted last month from 1994 to 1998, covering both the PDF and the PML governments. Its report specially expresses its concern over the low rent of MPAs hostel and describes it as an injustice to the taxpayers.

According to the report, overseas calls amounting to Rs 527,492 were made by different officials and elected representatives as against the privileges of the assembly which did not allow anybody, including the Speaker, to avail this facility.

"Speaker, ministers and opposition leaders are entitled to unlimited calls (official and private). But private calls do not include overseas calls. From audit point of view these overseas calls were unjustified and irregular," the report says, asking for the recovery of the money from the people concerned.

The telephone numbers from which these calls were made include those of the Deputy Speaker and the Leader of the Opposition.

The report mentions spending of Rs 56,260 on printing of assembly debates during 1996-97 without obtaining a no-objection certificate from the Government Printing Press, which was a violation of the rules.

The debates were printed by a private party on quotations obtained in 1990. The comparative statement to justify it was undated and not signed by the assembly's Printing Committee. Four firms had offered Rs 116 per page for the 400 copies but reasons for rejecting the offers of three firms were not recorded nor was the approval of the contract winning firm shown to the audit.

Further, the debates were printed after an "abnormal" delay of seven years but the late delivery charges were not deducted from the bill. Also, no reason was given for accepting the work done after such a great delay.

The report says in reply to audit observations, the omission was admitted by the assembly authorities concerned. It recommends that the irregularities should be got condoned by the Finance Department. Instead, the amount should be recovered from those found responsible for the deal.

The audit report mentions that store articles worth Rs 41,063 were issued without maintaining records. In some cases orders of officers in charge competent to issue store articles were also not produced. "This created reason to believe that there was every possibility that the articles were misappropriated. The matter may be inquired into and facts brought to books," the report says.

It says as per law, trade and professional tax was required to be collected from suppliers/ contractors at the rate of Rs 1,000 each in a year for supplying goods, selling commodities and rendering services to government institutions. But no such tax was paid by the firms/ suppliers during 1994-98. The report recommends recovery of the taxes amounting to Rs 54,000.

It finds that mortgage deeds on account of house building advances amounting to Rs 1.49 million given to 32 low grade employees were not executed under the rules.

It recommends that either the mortgage deeds be immediately executed in favour of the government or the recovery be made from the defaulters alongwith interest accrued thereupon and deposited into government treasury.

The report finds that stock registers of general store, stationery, electric goods and equipments were not being maintained properly.

The irregularities found include un-attested entries in registers, no date of issuance, unauthorized overwriting, erasings and self-made requisitions.

Stock registers of Pipal's House Hostel were defective in entirety. Not a single entry was ever got attested or singed by the store keeper. The report asked for detailed investigations into the matter and disciplinary action against defaulters.

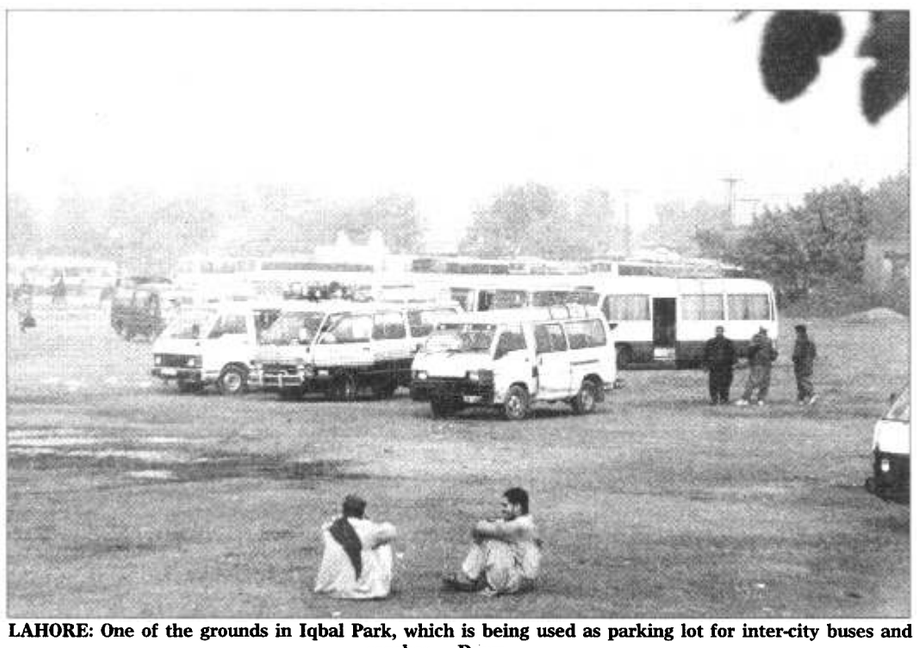
The report describes daily rent of Rs 50 of "highly decorated suites" in MPAs hostels as negligible. It finds the suites extraordinarily decorated with latest facilities including wall to wall carpets, airconditioners, refrigerators, televisions, room heaters and telephones.

"The rent of such suites is not less than Rs 1,000 per day in any hotel. The minimum overhead charges for these facilities could have exceeded Rs 200 per day and if the rent of the room is added with the services of staff including bearer, cook and peon, it may go up still further", the report says.

It observes: "Our country is an under-developed one and cannot bear such extravagance. The taxes are collected from the people and the main aim of their collection is to provide basic facilities like health and education.

"It is regretted to mention here that the revenue is being wasted on such luxurious apartments and the people will remain under the poverty line. It is therefore suggested that the schedule of rent and other services may be re-examined with a sympathetic and patriotic view and necessary amendments made."

The audit report says savings amounting to Rs 8.32 million were not surrendered well in time and as a result these were lapsed. This was done in violation of government rules and reasons for this must be explained.



LAHORE: One of the grounds in Iqbal Park, which is being used as parking lot for inter-city buses and coaches.— Dawn

Sports on way out

Transporters' squeeze on Iqbal Parks

By Our Sports Correspondent

LAHORE, Dec 31: The Iqbal Parks, one of the biggest sports complexes of the sub-continent, has recently lost its attraction as a sports and recreational centre as parking of buses and noise and air pollution caused by smoke-emitting vehicles has made sports activities extremely difficult.

Most of the Iqbal Parks Sports Complex grounds are getting damaged as transporters have started parking their buses there after adjacent stands at Badami Bagh, where the whole inter-city transport has recently been shifted, have fallen short of space to accommodate them.

Around 200 buses are seen parked all the time at one of the Iqbal Parks grounds. Drivers use different gates of the complex and keep moving the buses over grassy plots of various grounds, causing substantial damage.

This has affected the people who have been using these grounds for morning walk for years. Sportsmen from the adjacent Walled City, who have only this park left for their activities, are also finding carrying on their sports extremely difficult under the circumstances.

The Iqbal Parks Sports Complex is under the administration of the Punjab Sports Board which manages a number of grounds for cricket, hockey and football. The local administration has not sought permission from - even informed the Board - before allowing transporters to use the complex for parking buses.

A Punjab Sports Board spokesman told *Dawn* that PSB chairman Chaudhary Akhtar Rasool was going to lodge a written protest with the Lahore commissioner against the encroachment.

According to the spokesman, the grounds were recently upgraded at a heavy cost and transporters have already damaged them substantially.

The Minar-i-Pakistan has also been badly hit by the presence of thousands of buses whose noise and smoke is a perpetual source of irritation for people who visit the place for recreation.

Besides the General Bus Stand at Badami Bagh, buses which leave Lahore for upcountry usually stand at the nearby Azadi Chowk blowing the horns round-the-clock.

'Parliamentary body should probe Sharifs' assets, loans'

By Our Staff Reporter

LAHORE, Dec 31: Opposition leader in the Senate Chaudhry Aitzaz Ahsan has pleaded that a joint committee of parliament should investigate assets and the volume of the Sharifs' bank loans to help the family pay them back.

"The statement by Chief Minister Shahbaz Sharif that the Sharifs will pay back liabilities by selling the family's assets shows that the bank loans had incurred such heavy liabilities as to require them to sell property to make payments", Mr Ahsan said in a Press statement here on Thursday.

He said the admission by the chief minister had established that the loans were heavily loaded, unjustified and beyond the capacity of the debtor and were, therefore, a result of illegal favours. "This admission, too, has come after demands that military courts should be authorized to recover bank defaults", he said.

Mr Ahsan claimed that the Sharifs had the biggest portfolios in the country and that the debt had accumulated as a result of the family's political influence and misuse of executive authority for the past 15 years. When the PPP government sought to recover them, the Sharifs delayed it for one legal reason or the other, he stated.

As for the joint parliamentary committee's role in securing loan payments, the PPP senator pleaded that it would work out a time-frame, not exceeding three months, in addition to inquiring a number of questions which needed to be answered."This good and necessary work will enable the prime minister, the chief minister and their family to shed all debt liabilities", he added.

The questions needed to be investigated by the proposed house committee, according to Mr Ahsan, included as to what was the extent of total debt owed by the Sharifs, including that obtained through what he called frontmen in Pakistan and abroad.

Other questions to be probed, according to Mr Ahsan, were whether any of the loans were ever written-off or rescheduled under political influence; which particular loans were obtained during the period when Mr Nawaz Sharif was the Punjab's finance minister or chief minister or the prime minister; what collateral securities were provided for a loan or whether they were sufficient to match a loan; whether any loans were obtained abroad by the Sharifs and if so, whether they were declared in Pakistan and whether the Sharifs assets within the country and abroad carried sufficient value to pay off bank debts.

LAHORE, Dec 31: A lady doctor would be deputed in government hospitals of every city in the Punjab for correctly reporting violence against women.

This was decided here on Thursday at a meeting of the special committee formed by the chief minister to formulate proposals to check violence and aggression against women, says a handout issued here.

The committee members would be authorized to contact the deputy commissioner concerned and IG police and the establishment would fully cooperate with them by immediately taking action on their complaints and would submit report to the committee.

The meeting also decided to ask the industries department to improve the quality of the kerosene oil stoves being marketed in the province by local manufacturers. The brand name should also be engraved on each stove, it said. — Reporter

Alhamra probe body yet to get record of maintenance

By Our Staff Reporter

LAHORE, Dec 31: The inquiry committee investigating the factors responsible for the collapse of the roof of Alhamra Hall-II on Tuesday has so far not been provided with the relevant maintenance record by the Alhamra Arts Centre authorities.

According to informed sources, the committee which met here on Thursday afternoon could not reach any conclusion due to the non-availability of the record.

The meeting was held without the NESPAK representative on the committee.

"We still do not know as to who carried out the repairs during the past few years. It will be difficult to fix responsibility for the unfortunate incident in the absence of the relevant record," an official, who requested anonymity, told this reporter.

The official said the committee had, however, sent samples of roof materials for laboratory tests.

He said the probe may take longer than promised by the provincial government.

It may be recalled that an official handout issued by the government after the incident promised that the committee would release its findings in 48 hours.

Naheed Khan's interim bail extended

By Our Staff Reporter

LAHORE, Dec 31: The Lahore High Court on Thursday adjourned the hearing of the bail plea of Ms Naheed Khan, opposition leader Benazir Bhutto's political secretary, till Jan 25, 1999, and extended the interim bail granted to her on Tuesday till that date.

Assistant Advocate-General Husain Nawaz Bhatti informed the bench comprising Justices Khalilur Rahman Ramday and Zafar Pasha Chaudhry that offences under the Anti-Terrorist Act have been added to the FIR against Ms Khan for obstructing government servants in the performance of their duty which make the case against her non-bailable.

Advocate Raja Muhammad Anwar, the petitioner's counsel, submitted that Ms Khan was booked for defamation and intimidation and not for attempting to obstruct anybody from performing his duties. There is a separate provision for such obstruction under the PPC but the offence has not been mentioned in the schedule to the Anti-Terrorist Act. The offence is not triable under the ATA and the case remains bailable.

"What can be bigger obstruction than blackening the face of an official attending the court to record his evidence", remarked Justice Ramday.

Raja Anwar said the only role attributed to Ms Khan was that she allegedly asked Punjab PPP vice-president Raja Ashraf Pervaiz to 'take care' of Ehtesab Bureau official Sami Khilji. She never uttered these words and had nothing to do with a subsequent altercation between Raja Ashraf and the official.

Justice Zafar Pasha referred to certain amendments made in the ATA and the bench decided to adjourn the hearing till Jan 25, 1999.

Advocate Munir Ahmad Khan informed the court that about 18 people have been arrested by police in the high court without assigning any reason. An assistant commissioner rejoined that the arrests were made at the outer gate of the LHC building. The detenus were coming in a procession and the police suspected that they would create trouble in the high court.

Justice Ramday asked the AC to release the detenus if there was nothing serious against them.

Ad hoc lecturers get extension

LAHORE, Dec 31: The Punjab government has granted a three-months extension in service to all 1,342 adhoc lecturers whose services were to be dispensed with on Dec 31.

According to an Education Department order, the terms and conditions of their adhoc appointment shall remain the same.

Talking to *Dawn*, Higher Education secretary Dr Shahzad Qaiser said the extension had been granted because it would take around three months to finalize the selection process for adhoc teachers by the Punjab Public Service Commission.— Reporter

Action against fake co-op societies after Eid

By Our Reporter

LAHORE, Dec 31: The Punjab government will launch a grand operation against fake cooperative societies.

This was decided at a meeting of cooperatives department and the Punjab Provincial Cooperative Bank here on Thursday. Punjab Cooperatives Minister Chaudhry Muhammad Riaz was in the chair.

The meeting was told that about 40,000 cooperative societies were working in the Punjab and some of these were one-man show. The meeting decided that action would be launched against the bogus societies.

The meeting was informed that action against bogus societies would commence after Eidul Fitr. The cooperatives department has initiated a survey in this regard.

The meeting was also told that officials of the department were also involved in a few bogus societies.

The minister was told about the performance of the Co-op Bank and a report was presented regarding the recovery of its loans. Measures were also proposed to improve the Co-op Stores.

Tight security ordered for mosques, markets

By Our Staff Reporter

LAHORE, Dec 31: Punjab Chief Minister Shahbaz Sharif has directed the authorities concerned to bolster security arrangements for shopping centres and Fajr, Traweeh and Juma prayers.

Presiding over a meeting on the law and order situation, he said anti-social elements and law-breakers should be kept under check.

He said the government was determined to deal firmly with the law breakers and terrorists and protect lives and properties of the people.

About the security arrangements at banks, the chief minister said the officials concerned should discuss the matter with the bank authorities. He said cash vans should be provided better security.

The chief minister was briefed about the law and order situation in various districts of the province. He was also briefed about the steps taken against profiteering.

WAGON STAND: Mian Shahbaz Sharif also paid a visit to Badamai Bagh, where inter-city wagon stands have been shifted recently to end congestion at the railway station. He expressed his dissatisfaction with the facilities for passengers.

He said waiting rooms should be completed at the earliest. For this purpose the construction work should be carried out round-the-clock.

The chief minister directed the Lord Mayor to personally supervise the task even if he had to stay at the site during nights.

He said the shifting of wagon stands to new premises should not cause problems to commuters.

The chief minister took serious notice of the state of latrines at Badami Bagh Bus Stand and ordered immediate arrest of the contractor who was charging Rs 4 to 5 a person.

Mian Shahbaz Sharif said the person who was causing so much 'torture' to commuters should himself undergo the same for a night.

He said in case of loadshedding, electricity should be provided to the bus stand by generators.

LAHORE, Dec 31: One person was killed and three others, including a woman, were injured in a road accident near Yakki Gate on the Circular Road on Thursday.

Ignored: the common citizen

By Shaukat Ali

LAHORE, Dec 31: As if the increase in the general sales tax was not enough to push up prices, the government has now asked importers to obtain 80 per cent, instead of 50 per cent, of foreign exchange from the open currency market at the inter-bank-floating rate in order to purchase goods from the international markets.

Since the greenback is dearer in the form of composite exchange rate by about Rs 5 per dollar as compared to the official rate, importers have worked out that the new measure will effect an overall increase from three to four per cent in the total import cost. As the volume of the cost of imported goods soars high, duties and sales tax on imported goods will inevitably register a rise commensurate with the import value.

The accumulative impact of the new government decision, according to business circles, will be a price rise in imported goods in the retail markets at around eight per cent.

Pakistan's imports have been outweighing exports for decades and that, too, of scores of goods of daily use which an average household cannot do without. Under these conditions common citizens, already desperately looking for some respite from spiralling prices are now again facing another surge in the prices of essential articles.

It appears as if the government is concerned only about the balance sheet relating to its own accounts and is not bothered about the cost even if it cripples the citizen.

No wonder that the average person mistrusts the lofty claims of the government about having settled terms with the World Bank and the IMF for the benefit of the people.

The government should not assume that people are unaware of the money coming to it from many sources which were not accounted for in the annual budget and which is not being spent to ease economic hardships at the grassroots level.

For instance, the sharply falling crude oil rate in the international market is bringing an unprecedented windfall to the government enabling it in the present fiscal year alone to reap an additional amount of Rs 70 billion to Rs 75 billion from the difference in prices between the international and the home market.

The unexpected release of stuck up $466 million from the US against the inconclusive F-16 deal - around Rs 23 billion - must have eased the financial crunch for Islamabad. Of this amount, the government hopes to spend $140 million to lift wheat from the US in the coming two years, relieving it further from the worries of maintaining the wheat supply at the desired rates for at least the next two years.

Fortunately enough, the gamble of floating dollar bonds to beat the threat of world sanctions has proved a success as it brings $310 million to the official kitty thus making it fairly convenient for the government to replenish the depleted foreign currency accounts of citizens of Pakistan which were grabbed by Islamabad to meet a crisis situation.

The remittance situation is most likely to improve with the permission by the government to expatriates to convert foreign currency sent by them at the composite exchange rate.

Seen along side some other key factors working to ease the financial miseries of the government in the export sector, it is incomprehensible as why the government is showing so much stubbornness in passing on the benefit to the people. What irks more is the fact that no plan is in sight to offset the impact of the indirect taxation of Rs 7 billion through the GST and an increase in the import value, which will further burden the end consumers.

The government must not overlook the fact that public sector employees have been waiting for some increase in their salaries since 1993. During these five years the rise in utility bills alone has swallowed up whatever little they could have saved from their limited incomes for the future of their children or in getting quality education for them.

The fixed income group in the private sector has been even worst hit economically because the scourge of joblessness has helped only to further squeeze their resources. They are passing each day hoping that the government will bring them some solace.

If the government does not feel shy of imposing new taxation worth billions of rupees before or after the annual budget, it should not feel averse to offering relief to the people caught up in the economic quagmire at any point of the year as well. They can only feel battered by the operation of free-market economy — at least from what they have seen happening in their country.

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